

# The Character of Christian Contentment

Philippians 4:10–13

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## Introduction

We return again this morning to the fourth chapter of Paul’s letter to the Philippians. And as we turn to our text in Philippians chapter 4, we discover that the Apostle Paul, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, has a word for us this morning about contentment.

In the late fourth century BC, the Great Conqueror, Alexander the Great, was systematically subduing the most powerful global force, the Persian Empire. In the span of just a few years, the King of Macedon had spread his reign from the relatively tiny peninsula in Greece as far south as Egypt, through the Turkish peninsula in Asia Minor, all across Israel and Mesopotamia, through even present-day Iran and Afghanistan—all the way to the Indus River Valley in modern-day India. Alexander had literally conquered the known world. And you’d think, as he stopped to survey and reflect upon the great vastness of his empire, that he would have experienced a sense of accomplishment and fulfillment—that he’d be content with what he had managed to accomplish. But it’s said, in a quote that is often attributed to John Milton but whose true author is not known for certain, “When Alexander saw the breadth of his domain, he wept for there were no more worlds to conquer.”

That story is similar to one that’s told about the 19<sup>th</sup>-century multi-millionaire, John D. Rockefeller. Adjusting for inflation, Rockefeller’s oil business made him what many consider to be the single richest man in history to this day—a net worth of what would be equivalent today to \$340 billion. And it’s said that someone once asked him the question, “Mr. Rockefeller, how much money is enough?!” His answer was quite transparent: “Just a little bit more.”

And that elusive nature of contentment is not isolated to these men. Our society today is plagued with the disease of discontentment. Just a few years ago we saw the housing market go absolutely haywire because of how many people were not content to live within their means, but borrowed absurd amounts of money to live in a supersized dream-home that they knew they could never afford. Credit card debt is expected of consumers today, as the average credit card debt per household in the United States is in excess of \$7,000. Not having the money to actually *pay* for things hasn’t stopped the American consumer armed with a plastic card. People are discontent with the cars they drive, so every few years they upgrade to the newest model. We’re discontent with the cell phones and electronic gadgets we have, so every season we’ve got to upgrade from the iPad4 to the iPad5, from the Samsung Galaxy 3 to the Samsung Galaxy 4, from

the iPhone5 to the iPhone5S. In fact, the entire television and advertising industry—in its totality—is built upon the principle of sowing *discontentment*—on convincing you that you need something you don't have, so you go out and buy it from them.

And we could go on. People are discontent with their singleness and so fornication is rampant. People are discontent with their spouses and so divorce and adultery is rampant. People are discontent with their current jobs and salary so the work-world is dominated by a cut-throat atmosphere. As rich and as and as prosperous as our nation is, you'd think we'd be even just a *little* more content than we are. But it is not so.

And though we might not like to admit it, the church has not managed to keep discontentment from entering its four walls.

But in stark contrast to this society that is plagued with discontentment, the Bible calls Christians to a life of utter contentment. Paul says in 1 Timothy 6:7-8: “For we have brought nothing into the world, so we cannot take anything out of it either. If we have food and covering, with these we shall be *content*.” The writer of Hebrews says in chapter 13 verse 5 of his letter: “Make sure that your character is free from the love of money, being *content* with what you have.” And even John the Baptist, as he came proclaiming his Gospel of repentance, when asked what the *fruits* of that repentance would be, said to the soldiers, among other things: “Be *content* with your wages.”

The great Puritan Jeremiah Burroughs, in his marvelous treatise entitled, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*, defined Christian contentment as “that sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit, which freely submits to and delights in God's wise and fatherly disposal in every condition” (19). Now I can't imagine a description more starkly in contrast with our society than that one.

And so the question that we're confronted with is: How can we as the people of God go about pursuing that sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit that Burroughs writes about—that disposition which grates against the grain of the culture that surrounds us, and against the principle of remaining sin within us? And the answer must be to go to the Word of God. In Philippians chapter 4, Paul has a lesson about contentment that he desires to teach the people of God. And it is my hope that we can learn some of that lesson this morning.

Now, that lesson about contentment comes in the context of Paul's closing remarks to the church in Philippi. In the previous paragraph, Paul has completed his exhortations to his dear friends by summing up the main themes of his letter in his call for spiritual stability. And we spent a number of weeks examining in close detail what Paul has taught us are the *means* of spiritual

stability. We spoke about the primary importance of unity within the body of Christ in verses 2 and 3. We spoke about the foundational significance of rejoicing in the Lord in verse 4. We saw the great necessity of letting our gentle spirit be manifest to all people in verse 5. We learned to banish anxiety from our lives by means of thankful prayer in verses 6 and 7. And in verses 8 and 9 we learned of the indispensability of godly thinking, and how it plays a fundamental role in cultivating godly living.

But now that he has brought the body of his letter to a close, he turns in verses 10 to 20 to one of the main reasons for writing the letter to the Philippians in the first place—namely, to *thank* them for the gift that the church had sent him through the ministry of Epaphroditus. You remember this note of historical context. As Paul sat under house arrest in Rome, waiting to stand trial before the Emperor Nero, news of his trying circumstances had reached the dear congregation at Philippi. And out of their love for their dear Apostle, and in support of the Gospel which he preached—by which they themselves had been saved—the saints in Philippi purposed to send Epaphroditus on a 40-days’ journey to Rome, so that he could minister to Paul’s needs and provide fellowship for him.

But along with Epaphroditus, who would serve as a personal minister and friend to Paul in his trying circumstances, the Philippians also sent with him a financial gift to support Paul in his imprisonment. See, in the Roman world, if a prisoner couldn’t afford to pay for his living space and his meals, the Romans would simply leave him exposed to the elements while he was shackled outdoors. You might remember that at the end of the book of Acts, Luke says that Paul “stayed two full years in his own rented quarters....” (Ac 28:30) And so that monetary offering would provide the means for Paul to continue to rent his quarters and pay for his meals, and even perhaps facilitate other Gospel opportunities that he could administrate even while imprisoned.

And so as he writes back to the Philippians, to encourage them as to his well-being and to exhort them to conduct themselves in a manner that is worthy of the Gospel of Christ (cf. 1:27), he also wants to express his heartfelt *thanks* to his dear friends for their kind gift to him. And so what we have in verses 10 to 20 basically amount to Paul’s thank-you note to the Philippians for their support of him in his trials.

But because the Apostle Paul was a man who was so dominated by the Lord Jesus Christ and His Gospel, even the way that he writes his thank-you notes proves both interesting and instructive for us, the people of God. Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote, “There is nothing, I always feel, about this great epistle, which is more interesting than to observe in detail the way in which the Apostle does everything; and the way in which he offers his thanks to the members of the church at Philippi is full of instruction and of interest” (*Life of Peace*, 203). Paul is concerned, even by means of something as seemingly-mundane as a thank-you note, to communicate to the Philippians that his great joy at receiving their gift did not spring from discontentment. He didn’t

want to give the impression that Christ Himself was insufficient to sustain his joy in all circumstances.

And so beneath the surface of this thank-you note, Paul sets out to *model* for the Philippians what it looks like to be utterly content in the Lord Jesus Christ, no matter what circumstances he finds himself in. And it's not a stretch of the imagination to recognize that the Philippians needed to hear this message. Just a few verses earlier he exhorted them to "Be anxious for nothing," and instructed them as to how they should experience "the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension." And later in this thank-you note, in verse 19, he makes reference to their *needs*, for which God will provide according to the riches of His glory in Christ Jesus. And when you consider that in the immediately preceding verse, verse 9, Paul has exhorted them to practice what they had seen modeled in *him*, it's plain that he believed the Philippians could benefit from a lesson on what it meant to be content—even, and especially, in the midst of difficult of and trying circumstances. And so as he thanked them for their gift, he also, indirectly, offered himself as an example of true, Christian contentment.

And we can benefit from that same lesson as well, friends, as it is embodied in the example of the Apostle Paul. In the midst of our own present difficulties and the challenges which we face from day to day—and in the midst of a society which is characterized by *discontentment* almost as a philosophy of life—we too need to "learn the secret," as Paul says, of true contentment in Christ. Let's read our text this morning, Philippians chapter 4, verses 10 to 13: "But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly, that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned *before*, but you lacked opportunity. <sup>11</sup>Not that I speak from want, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. <sup>12</sup>I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. <sup>13</sup>I can do all things through Him who strengthens me."

In this text—the beginning of Paul's thank-you note to the Philippians—we discover **four characteristics of Christian contentment—four spiritual truths** that will aid us in "learning the secret" of being truly content in the Lord Jesus Christ.

### **I. Patiently Trusts in the Sovereign Providence of God (v. 10)**

The **first characteristic of Christian contentment** that we see in this text is that contentment springs from **a patient trust in the sovereign providence of God**. Look again at verse 10. Paul writes, "But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly, that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you *were* concerned before, but you lacked opportunity."

You see, by the time Paul was writing this letter, over 10 years had passed from the time that he had founded the Philippian church. And right from the start, the Philippians had outdone the rest of the churches by financially supporting the missionary journeys of the Apostle Paul. If you look down to verse 15 of chapter 4, Paul says, “You yourselves also know, Philippians, that at the first preaching of the gospel, after I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving but you alone; for even in *Thessalonica* you sent a gift more than once for my needs.” And the reason Thessalonica is important is because Thessalonica was Paul’s very next stop after he had left Philippi. So the Philippians were committed to Gospel-partnership with the Apostle Paul from the very beginning. As soon as he left them they sent money! And he says they did this “more than once.” And that was something that no other church had done.

But as I said, since that time, many years had passed. And though there may have been other times through the years that the Philippians were able to support the Apostle Paul, the text implies that considerable time had passed since their last gift. Paul says he rejoiced that “*now, at last*” they had revived their concern for him. And as the Philippians read that phrase, “now at last,” they may have wondered to themselves if Paul was issuing them a subtle rebuke for waiting so long in between. You’ve all been “thanked” like that at one time or another haven’t you? “Oh, thank you! You *finally* remembered me and decided to send me some help! (Took you long enough!)”

But you see, Paul was such a tactful, socially aware, Christian gentleman that he anticipated that misconception and assured the Philippians that that was not his intent at all. And he communicates that in a number of ways. First, he describes their gift as a manifestation of the *revival* of their concern for him. And the Greek word translated “revived” in the NAS is a horticultural or botanical term that was used in extra-biblical Greek of a bush or a tree blossoming again in the springtime after a period of dormancy through the winter. And even though we don’t have long winters here in Southern California, we can understand that image.

Just outside of our bedroom window in our apartment complex, there is a view of a row of crape myrtle trees whose green leaves and pink flowers make the most beautiful contrast against the backdrop of the clear blue sky. And they’re such a sight to behold that sometimes they’re enough to put you in a good mood all by themselves. But in December and January, all the leaves and all the flowers fall off, and the once-beautiful trees are left with bare branches. And at *that* time of year looking at those trees can actually be a little depressing! But in late February or maybe early March, those branches begin to bud again, and usually at some point Janna will call my attention to it and, with a smile, say, “The flowers on the trees are budding!” And we rejoice with great acclamation.

Well, that's the image that Paul is using here. During those winter months when there are no leaves or flowers on the trees, *life* nevertheless remains in those trees. You might not see any signs of it, but the sap is still flowing through the branches of those trees. And we see that life "revived" in springtime when it begins to bud again. Paul is saying, "I know that the life of your concern for me has been there all along, even if it has revived only recently." And then he even goes on to say explicitly, "Indeed, you *were* concerned before, but you lacked opportunity." Now, the commentators have offered various suggestions as to why they lacked opportunity. Perhaps they weren't aware of Paul's needs, or perhaps they didn't know where precisely he was or how to get a hold of him. Perhaps they didn't have a suitable messenger to bring their gift to him, or perhaps they were so financially pressed that they had nothing to give. Whatever the circumstance, Paul makes it clear that the Philippians were not to blame. Their love and friendship were there all along; they had simply lacked opportunity.

Now, that kind of magnanimous attitude reflects Paul's **patient trust in the sovereign providence of God**. The entire time in between the instances in which he received help from the Philippians, he wasn't sitting there tapping his foot, frustrated, questioning their love for him. Still less was he panicking, stressed out about how he was going to have enough resources to make it through the next month. He knew that His God was on the throne of the universe—that He was (and is) *absolutely* sovereign over every detail of everything that happens.

You see, friends, one of the greatest keys to enjoying true contentment is a rock solid trust in the *absolute* sovereignty of God. You say, "How sovereign?" *Absolutely* sovereign. "Yeah, but only over the big stuff, right? I mean God's got better things to do than to be concerned with the trivial matters of my life." Wrong. What does Romans 8:28 say? "And we know God causes..." *some* things? The *big* things to work together for good? No. "We know that God causes *all* things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." In fact, just a few months before he wrote the Book of Philippians, Paul penned the words of Ephesians 1:11, which describe God as the One "who works *all* things after the counsel of His will." And he was just echoing the teaching of Jesus, who when He was teaching His disciples not to fear even death in the cause of following Him, asked them, "Are not two sparrows sold for a cent? And yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So do not fear; you are more valuable than many sparrows" (Matt 10:29–31). God is sovereign over just the *big* things in life? No way. He knows *the number of hairs* on your head. Sparrows are sold two for a penny, and *not one* of them dies apart from the sovereign providence of God. That great hymn, says, "Heav'nly peace, divinest comfort / Here by faith in Him to dwell / For I know what'er befall me / Jesus doeth—" *some* things well? Merely "alloweth" all things well? No, "...Jesus *doeth* all things well." And *therein* is my "heav'nly peace" and "divinest comfort."

Friends, if we are going to know anything in our own lives of the kind of contentment that Paul experienced in his own life, then we, like him, need this rock solid foundation of the absolute sovereignty of God. I'll be honest with you: I have no idea how Arminians obey the command to be content. How could you be content and at peace if you believe *God* is not in control of absolutely everything in your life—if just a few things escape His sovereign control? Friends, a god who is not sovereign over absolutely everything is a god who *cannot* promise peace and comfort for your soul, because there are some things that are just out of his control. But *Paul* can be content—and *we* can be content—*whatever* our circumstances—because we have a God who is working *all* things after the counsel of His own will, and who promises to sovereignly govern every aspect of this universe in such a way that it all works for your *good*—which he defines as your ever-increasing conformity to the image of Christ (Rom 8:29). And so when circumstances come that would seem to tempt you to be discontent, you need to remember that *in* those circumstances, no matter how sharp they may seem, God is sovereign, and He is purposefully intending to display His love and goodness to you through those circumstances. Therefore, it is your business to look for that goodness, to behold His glory somewhere put on display, and to look for the way in which you are to grow more greatly into Christlikeness.

And what is the result of that robust understanding of **God's sovereign providence**? It is contentment. It is *great* joy. Look at the text. Paul says, "I rejoiced in the Lord greatly." Why? Calvin says it best: "...[because] that man can never be poor in mind who is satisfied with the lot which has been assigned to him by God" (124).

And note that Paul is not rejoicing in *the gift*; he is rejoicing in the Giver *of* that gift, whom he acknowledges to be the Lord. *Another* indication of Paul's trust in the sovereign provision of God: when he receives the Philippians' gift from Epaphroditus, he doesn't let his joy terminate in the gift, but recognizes that that gift is ultimately from the Lord Himself—that the Lord is sovereignly providing all things for His children by means of His church.

And even more than that, I believe Paul rejoices *in the Lord* because of the glory of Christ that is displayed in the Philippians' obedience. Don't miss this here; this is precious. What Paul saw in their gift was certainly a manifestation of their own concern and love for him. But more than that, their gift was a manifestation of the grace of God at work in their lives. God had so graced them to make Christ so glorious and precious to them, that they could count their money as loss for the sake of Christ, and gladly give away their already-meager resources for the sake *of* the Gospel! You see, when the souls of God's people are so satisfied in Christ that they joyfully and sacrificially lay down their earthly treasure in the service of the Gospel, Christ's glory is magnified! And so if you want to glorify Christ, dear friends, cultivate your heart to find your satisfaction in *Him*! And then display that satisfaction, by laying down your life in the service of God's people!

And so Paul is content. Even as he sits under house arrest, chained by the wrist to a Roman soldier 24 hours of the day, he rejoices greatly, because he **patiently trusts the sovereign providence of God**.

## **II. Independent of the Circumstances of Life (vv. 11–12)**

A **second characteristic of Christian contentment** is that true contentment is **independent of the circumstances of life**. Look with me at verses 11 and 12: “Not that I speak from want, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need.”

Paul has already anticipated one misinterpretation of what he’s saying in verse 10. Here in verse 11 he seeks to correct another potential misunderstanding. He says, “Not that I speak from want.” In other words: Please don’t misunderstand my enthusiasm. Yes, when I received your gift from Epaphroditus, I rejoiced in the Lord *greatly*. But I wasn’t trying to manipulate you into sending another gift soon. Neither was I rejoicing particularly at the improvement of my financial situation. My joy, my contentment, isn’t in my circumstances. In fact, I’ve learned to be content in *whatever* circumstances I am.

You see, Paul wasn’t someone who found his satisfaction in a “healthy” bank account. Paul’s joy isn’t the joy of someone who’s just found out he’s won the lottery, or who’s been given the opportunity to win an absurd amount of money on a game show. His joy, his satisfaction, his contentment are rooted *much* deeper than that. And he believes he would do a disservice to the Philippians if he were to mislead them to believe otherwise. And so he adds this qualification.

And it is here we learn that that true Christian contentment is **independent of the circumstances of life**. Now notice that I did not say it is *indifferent* to circumstances. There was a popular philosophy in Paul’s day called Stoicism that taught that to be content was to learn to be *indifferent* to circumstances—to cultivate such an emotional detachment, such a universal apathy, that no matter what happened to you, you were to be truly unaffected; you simply were not to care. You were to cultivate a numbness to all physical and emotional pain. Friends, can you think of a description of the Apostle Paul that is any *further* away from reality than that? Especially in this epistle, where the depth of Paul’s emotions are displayed almost without parallel in the entire New Testament! Where he speaks of *longing* for his brothers and sisters with the affection of Christ Jesus (1:8), where he speaks of having sorrow upon sorrow (2:27), where he speaks of weeping over apostates (3:18), and where he repeats the term “beloved” throughout the letter (2:12; 4:1). Paul was no Stoic! He was not *indifferent* to circumstances!



But his contentment *was independent from circumstances*. No matter what was happening *around* him, and no matter what was happening *to* him, his contentment was stable. And as we'll see in verse 12, Paul's life ran the gamut of circumstances. There were times when he had plenty, and there were times when it was all taken away from him. There were good times and bad times, easy times and difficult times. But the change in circumstances didn't make one bit of difference in his contentment. He was not *mastered* by the circumstances in which he found himself. In every situation, his happiness, his joy, and his satisfaction were solidly grounded in something circumstances couldn't touch.

You say, "How is that possible? How did Paul get to a place where his contentment wasn't touched by his circumstances?" He says he *learned* it. Verse 11: "...for I have *learned* to be content in whatever circumstances I am." You see, contentment is not a virtue that is natural to mankind. It must be learned. It must be cultivated. I love the way Spurgeon illustrates this. He says, "You will see at once...that contentment in all states is not a natural propensity of man. Ill weeds grow [rapidly]—covetousness, discontent, and murmuring—are as natural to man as thorns are to the soil. You have no need to sow thistles and brambles; they come up naturally enough, because they are native to earth, upon which rests the curse. [In the same way] you have no need to teach men to complain, they complain fast enough without any education. But the precious things of the earth must be cultivated. If we would have wheat, we must plow and sow; if we want flowers, there must be the garden and all the gardener's care. Now, contentment is one of the flowers of Heaven, and if we would have it, it must be cultivated! It will not grow in us by nature; it is the new nature, alone, that can produce it, and even then we must be especially careful and watchful that we maintain and cultivate the Divine Grace which God has sown in it." And then he says, "Do not indulge, any of you, the silly notion that you can be contented without learning, or learn without discipline; it is not a power that may be exercised naturally, but a science to be acquired gradually!"

And we know it is to be acquired gradually, because Paul uses a form of the Greek verb that communicates that he had learned the lesson over time and that its benefits are still present with him in the forefront of his mind. In fact in verse 12, he borrows a word that was used in the pagan mystery religions that meant "to be initiated into the secrets." Paul says this is insider knowledge. But unlike the mystery religions, he didn't learn this by some ecstatic experience, or by achieving an elite religious status. No, he learned this secret in the laboratory of life experience—walking through life as a follower of Jesus Christ and in constant communion with Him—Paul learned to be content through God's own dealings with him. He learned, as we said before, that God is in control of all things. And he learned that God was working all things for his good. He learned that his experiences and circumstances were the *gifts* of the sovereign providence of His Father, and that he could be satisfied in what his Father had given him. He learned, as he pled with the Lord to remove the thorn from his side, that God's grace is sufficient for His people in times of trial, and that *God's* power is made perfect in *our* weakness. So what

did he say, 2 Corinthians 12:10? “*Therefore, I am well content* with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak [in my own strength], then I am strong [in the strength of the Lord Jesus Christ].”

### **III. Satisfied in the Surpassing Value of Christ (vv. 12–13)**

And *that* is “the secret.” I’ve been hinting at it all along, but here I want to say it explicitly. Paul could be content “in any and every circumstance,” no matter how much they fluctuated, because he found his joy and his satisfaction in something—or better said, *Someone*—that never changes: the Lord Jesus Christ. And that is the **third characteristic of Christian contentment**. True contentment is **satisfied in the surpassing value of Christ**.

This of course anticipates what Paul says in verse 13, though we’ll camp out there just a bit later. He says, “I can do all things”—I can be content in *all* circumstances—“through *Christ* who strengthens me.” But it also looks back to statements that Paul has made earlier in the book of Philippians. You remember in chapter 1 verses 19 to 21, in that great sentence that so succinctly summarizes the entirety of the Christian life, Paul says that his eager expectation and confident hope is that Christ will be glorified in his body, whether he lives or dies. And he says that he can be sure that Christ *will* be magnified in his body because for him, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

And when we studied that passage together we saw that “to die is gain” means to survey all the wonderful things that death can take from us, and to prefer Christ as more valuable than those things, such that the loss of those things can be called *gain*, because we get Him. And in the same way, “to live is Christ” means to survey all the wonderful things that this life can offer, and prefer Christ as more valuable, such that everything else in your life is dispensable—it has no hold on your affections. If it becomes plain that, for you, following the Lord Jesus will mean loosening your grip on those things and even losing those things, then in the language of Philippians 3:8 you count all those things to be *loss* in comparison to the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus your Lord.

Now you see, if that describes you, if for you to live is Christ—if your satisfaction is in the surpassing value of knowing Christ—then when circumstances require that you “get along with humble means”—when money goes, when food goes, when the house goes, even when friends and family go—though you feel the sting of that loss, though you feel hunger pangs, though you face real, practical hardships, you are still content. In the face of all that loss, you can still behold Christ with the eyes of faith and cry, “*Gain*.” Because your satisfaction, at its most fundamental level, isn’t in those things. It’s in Christ. And He will *never* change. He will *never* leave.

That's why Scripture says what it does in Hebrews chapter 13 verse 5. Turn there with me. Hebrews 13:5: "Make sure that your character is free from the love of money,"—or free from the love of *stuff*, free from the love of toys and gadgets, free from the love of cars and houses and filet mignon steaks—"being" what? "*content* with what you have." OK. *Why*, writer-of-Hebrews? What is the basis for my contentment? Why can I be content with what I have? "*For* He Himself has said, '*I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you.*'" Do you see the way Scripture reasons, there? You can be free from the discontentment that is inherent in the love of money—or in the love of any other idol—and you can be *content* with what you have, because what you have is *God!* You can count everything as loss, because of the surpassing value of knowing *Christ!* You see, friends, **contentment is a matter of proper worship!** We do not *worship* the things that our circumstances bring us. We worship *Christ*. And so if the Lord decides to change our circumstances such that the comforts that we had been enjoying are taken away from us, our contentment is untouched, because our satisfaction is in Christ.

*That* is the secret of contentment. And when you know that secret, and live like it's true, then you along with Paul will be able to say, verse 12, "I know *how* to be abased, and I know *how* to abound." You know *how*, because you know *Christ*, and because you are more satisfied by Christ than by all that life can offer you and all that suffering can take from you.

When that is true of you, you will be able to be content with little. Paul says he knows how to be brought low, he's learned the secret of going hungry and suffering need without losing his contentment. And we know it's true for Paul! Paul was no ivory tower theoretician! He's writing from a Roman prison, chained to a Roman soldier, maligned by fellow preachers in Rome, and prohibited from ministering the Gospel freely, which was his great longing. And life on the outside was very rarely much different! In 2 Corinthians 11:27, while he was ministering freely, he writes, "I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure." In 1 Corinthians 4:11, he says, "To this present hour we are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed, and are roughly treated, and are homeless." And a few verses later he would summarize it by saying, "we have become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things." And you say, "And how do you feel about all that, Paul?" And he says, "I count food, and drink, and fine clothing, and respectful treatment, and even a place to lay my head—all the things I have lost for Christ, I count it all as *refuse*, that I may gain Christ. And gaining Christ, I am content."

And friend when the Lord providentially governs your circumstances so that you feel that your spouse or your children don't appreciate you, so that you feel you're undervalued at work, when someone else is given the promotion that you deserved, when someone else advances to a place in ministry that you feel should have been your own, when you suffer the loss of *all things* on the path of obedience to Christ—dear friend, you can be content, because your pleasure and your satisfaction is in Christ, and He is ever yours.

And Paul says: that is not only the secret of being content with little. It is the secret of being content with much. He also says in verse 12 that he knows how to abound, how to be well-fed, and how to have abundance. Now, you say, “Isn’t it easy to be content with abundance?” Well, it may be easier to be content in *circumstances* when you have abundance. But precisely because of that, it is often much more difficult to find your contentment in *Christ* when you have an abundance of other things to put your contentment in. Lloyd-Jones said, “How difficult it is for the wealthy person not to feel complete independence of God. When we are rich and can arrange and manipulate everything, we tend to forget God. Most of us remember him when we are down. When we are in need we begin to pray, but, when we have everything we need, how easy it is to forget God” (*Life of Peace*, 209).

That’s why Jesus says it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God (Luke 18:25)—because the seductive power of riches is in getting you to put your trust in it, in giving it your heart. And you cannot serve God *and* money (Matt 6:24). Knowing how to abound means knowing how to enjoy the blessings of God’s good gifts while still finding your *satisfaction* in the *Giver*. It means understanding what Jesus said in Luke 12:15: that “not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions.” Knowing how to abound means living consistently with the reality that even when abundance is present, *that* is not what your life is about. It is not what secures your happiness. You know how to abound when you can hold your abundance loosely—when it doesn’t have a grip on your heart—when you can enjoy it while all the while being perfectly prepared to part with it, if it should be the Lord’s will to take it from you.

Now friends, you who are blessed with a season of abundance from the Lord, do you know how to abound? Do you enjoy God’s gifts for the sake of the Giver? enjoying them all for what they show of *God*? Or, in your abundance, has your heart become proud, and have you *forgotten* the Lord your God who redeemed you out of the house of slavery (Deut 8:14)? If the latter, my friend, don’t fool yourself into believing that you are content. If your satisfaction is not in Christ, you’re just an idolater, happy with his idols, *using* Christ as a means to get to your *real* god—to what you *really* want.

And if that’s you, I would just invite you to repent. Confess your idolatry and your discontentment to God, and turn to Him, asking that He might open your eyes to behold the loveliness of Christ; because *true* contentment is independent of the circumstances of life only when you are **satisfied in the surpassing value of Christ**.

#### **IV. Fueled by the Strength of our Savior (v. 13)**

Well finally, we come to our **fourth characteristic of Christian contentment**. True contentment trusts in the sovereign providence of God; it is independent of the circumstances of life; it is satisfied in the surpassing value of Christ. And **fourth**, it is **fueled by the strength of our Savior**. And we see this in verse 13: “I can do all things through Him”—or better translated: *in Him*—“who strengthens me.” “I can do all things in Him who strengthens me.”

And I hope that as we come to this very familiar verse *in its context* you can see for yourselves what violence this text has suffered at the hands of those who have treated it like a triumphalistic mantra of personal fulfillment. This might be *the* most popular verse at every Christian sporting event. In fact, the church Janna and I came from back in New Jersey meets in the gym of a Christian school, where the basketball games were played. And this verse is printed and spread out on a large banner that hangs on the wall. And what always made me laugh is that if both teams are from Christian schools—which they often were—the members of *both* of those teams are looking at that banner and “claiming the promise” to be able to do *all* things through Christ who strengthens them. You’ve got one kid thinking, “I can slam dunk over this kid through Christ who strengthens me.” And you’ve got the kid guarding him thinking, “I can block this slam dunk through Christ who strengthens me.” But at the end of every game, *one* of the teams loses! At least one team could not do *all* things through Christ who strengthens them!

Well I hope you see how foolish that is! This verse is *not* a triumphalistic mantra of personal fulfillment! It does *not* promise us omnipotence in order to fulfill our worldly ambitions! When we read this precious text in its context, we see plainly that Paul is saying he can experience all of those circumstances of being well-fed and hunger, of having abundance and suffering need—with *contentment*. What this verse teaches, is that the Christian’s contentment is **fueled by the strength of our Savior**.

You see, Paul was no Stoic. Stoicism taught that the contented person was the one who was “sufficient unto himself for all things, and able, by the power of his own will, to resist the force of circumstances” (Vincent, 143). No. Paul was sufficient; he was content. But his was not a *self*-sufficiency; his sufficiency was entirely due to the sufficiency of *Another*; his was a *Christ*-sufficiency.

And the translators uniformly render this verse, “I can do all things *through* Him who strengthens me.” And that is a legitimate option. But an even more literal translation is, “I can do all things *in* Him who strengthens me.” And that translation would surely fit with the “in Christ” motif that abounds throughout the letters of Paul (cf. Phil 1:1, 26; 3:9, 14; 4:7, 19, 21). So Paul is pointing to the paramount importance of his *union* with Christ. He is saying that “when he reached the limit of his resources and strength, even to the point of death, he was infused with the strength of Christ” through his *union* with Him by faith (MacArthur, 303). Commentator

William Hendriksen wrote, “The Lord is for Paul the Fountain of Wisdom, encouragement, and energy, actually infusing strength into him for every need” (Hendriksen, 206).

And where did this strength come from? How is it that the believer can experience this infusing of strength and power into our own souls, enabling us to be content in any circumstance? Well, it is not only in *union* with Christ, but also in communion with Christ. The great Puritan Jeremiah Burroughs, whom, we mentioned earlier, wrote that classic work on contentment, said that we draw strength from Christ as we *act our faith upon Him* (63). I love how *active* that phrase is! We must “act our faith upon Christ.” It means we have to *trust* Him. We have to trust that He is for us all that His Word *says* He is for us. And we won’t know the full breadth and depth of what He is for us if we don’t maintain communion with Him through prayer and Bible study.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones puts it simply: “What I have to do is go to Christ. I must spend my time with him, I must meditate upon him, I must get to know him. That was Paul’s ambition—‘that I might know him.’ I must maintain my contact and communion with Christ and I must concentrate on knowing Him” (*Life of Peace*, 226). Can I put it this way? We will never be fueled by the strength of our Savior unless we are satisfied with His surpassing value. And we will never be satisfied with His surpassing value if we don’t go *taste* and *see* that surpassing value as it’s infallibly displayed for us in the inerrant Scriptures. And so divine strength for contentment comes from meditation upon, and communion with, the Savior.

But it also comes from obedience to His Word. We cannot expect enjoy the peace and contentment that are found in Christ Jesus if we are being disobedient to His Word. If we are walking in sin we should not be surprised when we experience the unrest of anxiety and discontentment. Disobedient people *should* be discontent! Divine strength comes from communion with Christ, but disobedience severs communion with Christ. Isaiah 59 verse 2 says, “Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you so that He does not hear.” And so we can’t expect to be **fueled by the strength of our Savior** when we aren’t doing the things that He’s telling us!

### Conclusion

Well then, we’ve seen that true contentment trusts in the sovereign providence of God; it is independent of the circumstances of life; it is satisfied in the surpassing value of Christ; and it is fueled by the strength of our Savior. It is not to be found in an ever-growing bank account. It is not to be found aboard a cruise ship, in a boat house, in a summer home, or in a relaxing retirement. Contentment isn’t found in the office of a CEO, in the front seat of a fancy car, or in the many rooms of a Beverly Hills mansion. Friends, contentment isn’t even found *merely* in the relationships we have with our friends and family—because even friends and family disappoint,

and go away, and eventually will pass away from us into eternity. Contentment is found in one place, and one place only. And that is in Christ Jesus.

And maybe you are here this morning, and as you listen to God's Word preached you are aware of the convicting work of the Holy Spirit in your conscience. You recognize that you do not have a contentment that rises above circumstances. You recognize that your satisfaction does not finally terminate on Christ—that for you, to live is not Christ, but to live is money, or marriage, or singleness, or sex, or alcohol, or self-commendation and pride, or *any number* of the idols of your heart! My friend you have no contentment because you are not fueled by the divine strength of a Savior, because that strength comes only through union with Him. And as you cling to your sin and to your own self-righteousness, you do not find yourself *in* Him this morning, but outside of Him.

But my friend, I have good news for you. [Refer to audio for Gospel presentation.]